Canada’s 2017 Defence Policy: A Triple Boost for Canadian Defence Intelligence  

by Hristijan Ivanovski

“...spying is as old as history itself, and...it has always been of crucial importance to military commanders and political leaders.”

Rose Mary Sheldon, 2005

“The ability to collect, understand and disseminate relevant information and intelligence has become fundamental to the military’s ability to succeed on operations. This provides earlier warning of threats, allowing the Government to identify emerging events and crises, intervene earlier in the conflict cycle if necessary, and minimize the destructive effects of prolonged conflict.”

Canada’s Defence team, 2017

Introduction

Intelligence matters, no matter the era. A state which in peace or times of crisis tends to save taxpayers’ money at the expense of its security and intelligence apparatus pays with unnecessary blood during both peacetime and wartime. Similarly, a sovereign government that fails to prevent small-scale and strategic threats to its national security as far away from its borders as possible, including as a result of the inefficiency and failure of its foreign intelligence service(s), is not only incapable of shaping events in line with its vital national interests, such as providing for its population’s safety and general welfare, but is moreover inviting, however unintentionally, conflict domestically.

These fundamental truths have long served as axiomatic premises for strategy making and implementation in the national security domain. Today, they remain as valid as ever, if not even more so. As such, they have always been thoroughly understood within the broader, Anglo-American, “Three-to-Five Eyes” defence and intelligence community, with Canadian defence strategists and decision-makers being no exception. What’s more, Canada’s 2017 Defence Policy Review (DPR) takes a step further in acknowledging and emphasizing the strategic relevance of the state’s intelligence functions, Chapter 6 literally proclaims: “Intelligence is Canada’s first line of defense.”

But, why now, and why in such a forthright fashion? Is it because Canada’s defence, in all of its aspects—homeland security and disaster relief, overseas operations, and global engagement—has been so “...heavily dependent upon the systematic collection, coordination, fusion, production, and dissemination of defence intelligence?” Or, is it because “intelligence has become fundamental” to any military success? Certainly both, but still, there...
is more to the story, since the ‘whys’ are always resting deeper than just existing at the surface.

Strategic Culture and Strategic Environment

On an implicit or purely declaratory level, most, if not all, countries deem intelligence as their ‘first line of defence.’ This is understandable given the popular metaphorical portrayal of the spying craft as a government’s ‘eyes and ears,’ and occasionally even its ‘sword’ (i.e., sabotage, targeted assassinations including drone attacks), in distant foreign lands. However, what distinguishes Canada’s new, trident phased approach to defence (“Anticipate. Adapt. Act.”), is the formal and very much lucid prioritization of ISTAR (intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, reconnaissance) capabilities over other crucial defence needs. For Ottawa, placing high priority upon “joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance” (JISR), as well as upon “enhancing defence intelligence” and “academic outreach,” is not simply a matter of continuity—a mere conceptual reflection of a time-honoured strategic culture of forward defence, that is of the prudent notion and understanding that the risks of conflict and war within the North-Atlantic core of the Western hemisphere should be minimized at all costs, including through forward deployment of any proper mix of military and intelligence assets. It is, rather, necessitated by the growing complexity and “sweeping changes in the character” of the global strategic and operational environment.

In assessing these changes, Canada’s 2017 DPR, while basically conforming to allied equivalents generated over the past two decades, nonetheless renders a refreshed strategic picture, which is, moreover, nuanced from a Canadian perspective (i.e., Arctic issues). According to this up-to-date scan of the global strategic landscape, there are three ‘mega-trends’ of particular concern to Canada and its closest allies: the shifting balance of power and influence, not just in regions of particular importance to Canada and its allies, but globally; the changing nature of conflict (“grey zone[s],” hybrid warfare), and the rapid advance of technology, especially in the space and cyber domains. Taken together, these global tendencies are currently putting enormous pressure upon the Canadian and allied security and intelligence services.

In response, the Government of Canada and the Department of National Defence (DND) have recently undertaken to improve Canada’s intelligence capabilities. In the DPR, this commitment is captured by a single word: “Anticipate.” While there is nothing novel about using this term in a defence and security context, its inherent connotation and semantic profoundness are seldom exploited with both practical (capabilities) and psychological (PR/cognitive retention) objectives in mind. Seen through such lenses, the DND’s decision to use the term to designate the first phase of its new “AAA” approach to defence looks like a well-measured strategic move, despite giving away a couple of important aspects of its strategy:

Ottawa’s enhanced awareness and preventive attitude towards the surge in national security challenges (“better safe than sorry,” “better prevent than cure”); and, as a result, the imperative for the Canadian (defence) intelligence to “match the frantic pace of change.”

Terminology aside, the DPR is quite elaborate in defining Phase I and the concept of strategic anticipation for Canada. To “Anticipate” means to remain mindful of the strategic utility of “Accurate, [and] timely information,” “to better understand potential threats to Canada [uppercase by author],” and based upon “better situational awareness” and “earlier warning” capabilities not just to make Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel “more secure” and effective when deployed, but “…to enhance our [overall] ability to identify, prevent or prepare for, and respond to a wide range of contingencies.” While success in this anticipatory phase is inevitably contingent upon collaboration with federal departments and entities beyond the defence portfolio, nothing can be done without an adequate set of military tools and strategic initiatives.

Bolstering Defence Intelligence via Three ‘Meta-Measures’

To provide for this, the DPR outlines three general, overarching measures (already mentioned earlier), each representing a cluster of steps, procurement projects, and/or new defence initiatives. For analytic convenience, the first measure, concerning priority investments in JISR, can be divided into three pillars:

• investing in multiple JISR platforms, “including next generation surveillance aircraft, remotely piloted systems, and space-based surveillance assets;”
• integrating all existing and yet-to-be acquired JISR assets “into a networked, joint system-of-systems” for better operational command and control; and
• focusing, in particular, upon Arctic JISR as a research and development priority so as to come up with “innovative solutions” for sovereignty challenges in the North. 22

As for the first, key pillar, the DPR provides some insight into ongoing and upcoming acquisition or modernization projects. These specifically include the 2018 RADARSAT Constellation Mission,23 the projected replacement of the modernized CP-140 Auroras by “the early 2030s” with a new Canadian Multi-Purpose Aircraft, a brand new ISR platform for the Special Operations Forces, and “the incremental modernization in the mid-2020s” of the Victoria-Class submarines.24

The remaining two ‘meta-measures’ are needed to bolster Canada’s defence intelligence and related academic outreach. Within the first, DND/CAF intelligence personnel are first and foremost encouraged to continue with the reciprocal intelligence-sharing practice, especially within NATO and the Five Eyes Community, while also respecting the principles of the rule of law and civilian control.25 Then, given the ambitious agenda surrounding the future of the Canadian Forces Intelligence Command (CFINTCOM), which, inter alia, envisages an enhanced PSYOPS role for the Command,26 the Defence team fleshes out three “new initiatives:” boosting CFINTCOM’s operational support capacity (i.e., enhanced forecasting, smooth integration with next-generation
platforms, excellence in emerging domains such as cyber and space), recruiting up to 300 new defence intelligence officers (120 military personnel, including reservists, and 180 civilians), and establishing a CAF targeting capability. 27

Finally, mindful of the fact that the best intelligence information often resides in open sources and informed academic discussions, the Government of Canada and DND have lately been keen on allocating a more generous amount for the country’s well-nurtured academic and analytic community. Consequently, the DPR projects “$4.5 million per year” for expanding traditional DND programs (i.e., expert briefs, the Defence Engagement Grant) and creating more diverse collaborative expert networks across the country. 28

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The most direct answer, as formulated by the Defence team, reads: "The defence of Canada, the ability to operate effectively overseas, and the capacity to engage internationally are heavily dependent on the systematic collection, coordination, fusion, production, and dissemination of defence intelligence." *Ibid.* However, the aim of this somewhat analytical piece is, while explaining the relevance of (defence) intelligence to Canada along DPR lines, to shed as much light as it could on some more fundamental factors.

6.9 Speaking of continuity, observers ought not to be misguided by phraseology, such as the DPR’s promotion of “a fundamentally new…approach to defence.” *Ibid.* p. 63. While Canada’s defence strategy has, indeed, been well rethought in many respects and as a whole, the role of intelligence has always been taken seriously in Ottawa, London, and Washington.

8.10 Frank A. Smith, “The Importance of Why: An Intelligence Approach for a Multi-Polar World” (MA thesis, National Defence University, Joint Forces Staff College, Joint Advanced Warfighting School, Norfolk, VA, 2016), abstract, pp.1, 51, at: https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fuld/a22/107795.pdf Approaching the issue from a joint force perspective, Smith is more precise: “Sweeping changes in the political, social, and economic aspects of the strategic and operational environments…”


13.14 This trend has to do with recent geopolitical and geostategic developments. Underlying it is the partial return of the nation-state on the global scene, mainly through political realism, sovereignty, and social conservatism. Its defining features, on the other hand, are revived state competition, unequaling influence by non-state actors, and, as a result, growing complexity. In addition to the debatable end of “the era of terrorism,” the world is witnessing a new, more intense variant of special or hybrid warfare where state-sponsored non-state actors are all the more factorized.

15.16 It should be immediately pinpointed here that, while Phase I (“Anticipate”) of the DND’s new, “AAA” approach to defence “best supports the assertion that intelligence is Canada’s first line of defence,” it is by no means all-encompassing. For instance, according to the DPR, Phase II of the same approach, entitled “Adapt,” envisages improvements in the “Use of Space and Cyber Capabilities,” which would no doubt affect Canada’s defence intelligence capabilities at least indirectly. *Strong, Secure, Engaged,* pp. 67, 70-73. Also, among the projected capability improvements in the Royal Canadian Air Force, the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, as well as in terms of joint force, many are ISTAR–relevant. *Ibid.* pp. 38-42.

17.18 General Charles Bouchard, for instance, recently recalled how he had first heard this resonating word being used in a strategic manner in a NORAD context, namely as early as 2007-2008. Charles Bouchard, speech, 60th Anniversary Celebration, “NORAD at 60,” Royal Aviation Museum of Western Canada, Winnipeg, 24 May 2018.